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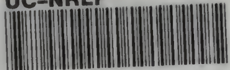

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THE INFLUENCE OF GREEK PHILOSOPHY ON ENGLISH POETRY

THE

CHANCELLOR'S ESSAY

1906

BY

ARTHUR H. SIDGWICK, B.A.

FELLOW OF UNIVERSITY COLLEGE

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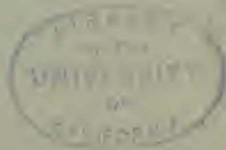

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φρυκτὸς δὲ φρυκτὸν δεῦρ' ἀπ' ἀγγάρου πυρός
ἔπεμπεν.

Aesch. Ag. 282-3.

CALIFORNIA

THE INFLUENCE OF GREEK PHILOSOPHY ON ENGLISH POETRY.

I.

INTRODUCTION.

Of all the forces that may influence poetry that of a past philosophy is the most difficult to estimate. The influence of metrical tradition, of native or foreign literary forms, of the great classics of the past, is comparatively easy to discern. It is somewhat harder to trace the effects of that intangible entity called "contemporary taste": but poetry is the creator as well as the creature of taste, and a broad survey of a whole period's literature will reveal the one in the other. But the influence of philosophy is generically different; it is a question, so to say, for the metaphysics rather than the physics of poetry. To estimate it adequately we have to regard poetry itself from the philosophical standpoint: we have to consider it no longer as a traditional form of artistic exercise, but rather as a means by which man expresses his feelings towards the deeper realities. Poetry, religion and philosophy all deal in part with the supersensible or supernatural—with something beyond the ordinary world as revealed to the first consciousness. It is this element which makes a poetic description differ from a literal reproduction, or a picture from a photograph. Hence, to relate poetry to philosophy we have to regard both as functions of that thought or spirit in man, which reaches beyond the sensible and material world to a deeper reality underlying it.

It is this which makes it difficult to estimate the influence of the philosophy of one age and nation on the poetry of another: for this thought or spirit in its manifestations eludes local and temporal limitations; indeed the categories of material science are altogether inapplicable to it. Its history is not like the history of science, a record of continuous growth by aggregation, errors being cast away and forgotten, and truth added to truth: error and truth are alike important to it, or

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rather, the terms take on a new meaning. Thought is an organic growth, continually absorbing alien elements and making them part of itself, and containing in itself, so to speak, its whole past. We cannot isolate Greek philosophy from the body of modern thought, any more than we can isolate the acorn from the oak.

It is thus clear at the outset that a full treatment of the subject would carry us far beyond the assigned limits. In the first place, we should need a complete history of thought in all its manifestations, embracing religion and philosophy as well as poetry. Secondly, we should have to show in each age how poetry was, in part at least, an expression of this thought. Thirdly, we should have to trace throughout the ways in which the old movements of Greek thought were repeated in aftertimes. To attempt this task at length is useless; to attempt it in outline would be unjust to poetry; we should need, for example, to pass lightly over ages when song flourished, to linger perhaps on a songless century of religious or philosophic development. The most that we can do is to point occasionally in the history of English poetry to the thought that lay behind it, to trace here and there the elements of Greek philosophy living again in it, and to avoid, where possible, the dangers of facile generalization.

On the strictly metaphysical side, then, our problem can only be briefly and inadequately treated. But in some other ways it comes within the physics of poetry; and here our task is easier. Greek philosophy, in its form as an ancient classic, exercised an influence in common with the other ancient classics. Hence we find in English poetry many reminiscences of the actual works of Greek philosophers, and of these we must take notice. We may roughly divide them into two classes. In the first come the stray references to ancient philosophy, such as the cosmological excerpts from Plato and Aristotle, which have often formed part of the poet's stock-in-trade of literary ornament. The second class is more important. At various times in English poetry actual doctrines or systems of the Greek philosophers have been taken over by our poets and formed into a kind of semi-poetic philosophy, more a literary cult than a spiritual creed. We may note especially two doctrines of Plato: that of *ἀνάμνησις* and the prenatal existence of the soul, and the doctrine of Eros in the Symposium and Phaedrus, which helped to form the curious and interesting belief known as Italian Platonism. Of the actual philosophy of poetry we need take little note. Aristotle's Poetics undoubtedly formed the basis of all subsequent aesthetic: but English poets, though often conversant with

orthodox criticism, were, as a whole, little influenced by the precepts and canons which wrought such havoc at times in Continental literature.

Finally, we come to a point in English literature where Greek philosophy has ceased to be an influence and has become a study. In this, as in other spheres, the nineteenth century began to win its freedom by perfect comprehension, by the self-consciousness of thought. At this point too begins what was impossible before—the reinterpretation of Greek life and philosophy in the light of the "historical imagination."

Such then, in outline, is our task. Dividing English poetry for convenience into four periods, we shall endeavour to trace in each both the primary influences of Greek philosophy as manifested in the thought of the age as it appears in poetry, and, also, the secondary iufluences, the systems based on the Greek philosophers, the references to their works, the traces of conscious aesthetic criticism.

To sum up briefly in anticipation, we may say that the tangible influence of Greek philosophy on our poetry was, on the whole, small, the intangible very great.

In the general history of thought it is impossible to overestimate the debt of the modern world to the Greeks. But the secondary influences rarely penetrated beneath the surface of English poetry. In that wonderful body of verse we may well claim to find the epitome of our national life—the continuity which disdains external shocks, the vitality which again and again arises from the ashes of decay, above all the spontaneity and freshness which are the well-spring of poetry. Such a living body can hardly be said to be influenced from without: rather it absorbs external elements and makes them its own. And, where we find traces of such influence, we may say that the mould is alien, but the clay is English, and the fire.

II.

—1500.

For the purposes of this essay the earlier ages of English poetry may be lightly passed over. Poetry must attain mastery over its material conditions—language, prosody, and metre—before it can rise above the accidental; and the formative process is of necessity long and arduous. Further, philosophy, though curiously vigorous in these isles in the

ninth and again in the thirteenth century, was at best the precarious possession of a chosen few: and over philosophy and poetry alike lay the shadow of the Church. A brief review of mediaeval thought as it emerges from barbarism may serve to show us how deep this shadow was.

The relation of Christianity to Greek philosophy forms a good illustration of the organic character of thought and of the failure of the scientific categories when applied to it. On the one hand, nearly every element in Christian thought finds a counterpart in Greek philosophy—in the asceticism and profound idealism of Plato, in the mystical ecstasy of Plotinus, in the assertion by the Stoics of the absolute value of the individual. At the same time, though the contrast may be overdrawn, yet it is almost true to say that in the Middle Ages the two systems seem directly antagonistic. Greek philosophy in its prime had proclaimed the doctrine of self-development: it had held up as its ideal the full activity of the trained citizen. Although in its later phases the dualism, inherent from the first, begins to become apparent, yet to the last we may say that the typical Greek doctrine is "live according to nature." Now it is hardly too much to say that the typical Christian doctrine of the Middle Ages is "live not according to nature." Christianity had both a positive and a negative side, but it was the latter which developed first: as has been well said, the cutting edge of truth was negative. Hence, at least in its extreme phases, the watchwords of mediaeval thought were abstraction and opposition: spirit was opposed to nature, faith to reason, this world to the next. Now this abstract dualism was of course utterly opposed to the concrete synthesis of poetry. The poet could find little inspiration in a world from which all divinity had been abstracted, in a human nature separated by a deep gulf from human spirit. The only path which logical mediaeval thought could allow to connect the two worlds was the "*via negativa*" of asceticism; only by the denial of nature could man rise to the true spiritual existence. The whole history of the Middle Ages is the history of the gradual mediation between these pairs of opposites, the gradual admission of the natural and human to a place beside the spiritual and divine. Of this mediation as it appears in thought we must take some notice.

The philosophic systems of this age were the natural outcome of its general mental attitude. The Platonic Realism[1] and the Aristotelian Nominalism are the natural twin products of a time when man was regarded as an isolated unit, living under a World Church, or even, in the heyday of the Holy

[1] I indicate the technical sense of this word throughout by the capital.

Roman Empire, a World State. Just becanse he was an abstract particular he fell under abstract universals. But it was of the nature of these systems that they could be nothing more than temporary halting places in the history of thought. Both, as they came to be developed, tended ultimately towards mediation. And we may note that there were at the same time movements in literature, which, if not exactly influenced by the movements in thought, were yet in many ways their counterparts.

Realism is of the two perhaps the creed most alien to the spirit of our own day, and most intimately allied to that of mediaevalism. We see this clearly if we look at what may be called its literary counterpart—the morality play, with its dramatis personæ of abstract universals, Justice, Benevolence and the Seven Deadly Sins. But both the philosophic system and the literary form were in the end solvents of mediaevalism. The reality of all abstract universals involved not only some co-ordination or organisation of the universals themselves, but also some adjustment of their relations to the universals of Christianity, if not admission into the orthodox hierarchy. The movement in literature was even more interesting: for here the universals had to appear in visible form and enact a story. Consequently, at once the bare figures of Mercy and Faith begin to fill out and become concrete by the addition of personal touches. Thus the spirit which animated Realism and its literary counterpart, in both spheres moved away from the abstraction in which it originated.

Nominalism, which had proved a failure in its earlier form, was revived in the thirteenth century, and under the stimulus of the actual study of Aristotle became a potent force in thought. The Church first of all rejected it, but, finding it too strong, threw open its gates, and seemed for the moment to have gained a valuable ally. A formidable theology was drawn up, based on the analytic logic which may be derived from a superficial study of the Organon: study of the Metaphysics was sternly forbidden, But the new Nominalism was not to be bound by such limits. The spirit of enquiry was already abroad; the tide was lapping at the barriers of mediaevalism. Already the abstract universal of Christendom was giving place to the concrete universals of nationality: man was becoming a concrete particular, and beginning to show an interest in other concrete particulars. The broad impartial study of phenomena as such which produced the pioneer work of Roger Bacon in science, fell in exactly with the spirit, if not the letter, of the new philosophy, and proved ultimately the solvent of the tangled complex of tradition and authority.

And without unduly straining the parallel, we may perhaps say that it was the same impulse, the same emancipating and and rationalizing force, which gave us the first great figure in our poetry.

For surely spontaneity, freshness, interest in particular things, are the great strength of Chaucer, and make him a fitting poet to stand at the head of our literary history. Chaucer was, of course, familiar with many of the ideas of Greek philosophy through his study of Boethius, who may be considered in many ways one of the main channels between the old world and the new. But for the most part these ideas had little real influence on Chaucer's poetry: the Host, in addressing the Clerk, is surely voicing the poet's own opinion of philosophy:

> "I trow ye study abouten some sophime:
> But Solomon saith that everything hath time.
> For Godde's sake as beth of better cheer:
> It is no time for to studien here."

On the other hand, when we consider Chaucer's freedom of thought and expressions, his boldness and naiveté, we may count him at least as a lay fighter in the army, whose commanders were Nominalists, and on whose banner was inscribed the name of Aristotle. It was a true instinct which drove the champions of intellectual and of aesthetic enlightenment to the actual world, to actual men and women: for it is only by the upward movement from below that the shackles of abstraction can be cast off. Of conscious idealization there is little in in Chaucer: he seems, like Homer, able to convey an ideal meaning through the most literal truth. Similarly, the rising scientific interest, because it was scientific, seemed bound to particular things as such: but, because it was an interest, it gave an earnest of that spiritualization of nature, which is the glory of the Elizabethans.

Langland, the second great figure of this age, is in many ways a counterpart to Chaucer. He has been called a mystic, while Chaucer is a rationalist: he was certainly often a Realist where Chaucer was a Nominalist. The spell of the abstract universal still at times enchains him: Truth, Simony, Civil Law, Hunger, take the place of the Knight and the Nonne Priest. Even Chaucer did not always succeed in individualising his types: Langland's types are hardly individual at all. Piers Plowman is, in fact, the poetic equivalent of the spirit of Realism, before it began to move downward to meet the rising Nominalism.

This movement may be seen more clearly in the development of the drama, which indeed shows throughout the process

of thought. The first stage is the Miracle play, the embodiment of Christian orthodoxy: then comes the Morality, in which Realism takes its place beside the orthodox hierarchy, and begins its descent towards actual life, and towards realism in the popular sense of the word. And, we may add, the cruder realism of the Interlude, the next stage, is the counterpart of the nominalist movement. The development of the Morality was a natural one: once the abstract personalities were placed upon the stage, the people's inherent dramatic instinct could be trusted to do the rest. What compelling power and interest there may be in such plays, even when cast definitely on allegorical lines, will be recognised by anyone who saw the recent performances of Everyman—one of a large group of Moralities all closely akin, which arose towards the end of this period. In such plays we feel that we are drawing near to Shakespeare, and nearer still to those mighty semi-personalised abstractions that bestride the world of Marlowe.

It is sometimes accounted strange that after the great period of mediaeval poetry a decline followed. It was really inevitable. The first outburst came when the enfranchising movement was just beginning, before the gravity of the issues was grasped: as the struggle with authority deepened the calmness and happiness of the earlier age vanished: as men drew near for the gulf that separates modern from mediaeval life they felt that there could be no more singing until they stood upon the further side. But the work of Chaucer and Langland and the nameless forefathers of our drama was not lost: more particularly the influences which we have traced above as linking them to Greek philosophy had yet a part to play in English Literature. Realism and Nominalism, the allegory and the story, were potent forces in the shaping of later poetry: they represent indeed those two powers, the ideal and the actual, which must ever rule jointly in the poetic world.

III.

1500—1660.

Any division of English poetry into chronological periods must always be somewhat arbitrary. One phase of poetic thought melts into the next by imperceptible gradations: it is difficult, almost impossible, to say at any single point that

one age has ended, and another begun. It is better to proceed negatively: we can say with some definiteness, for example, that the poetry of Surrey and Wyatt is far more akin to Sidney than to Occleve and Lydgate; we can thus roughly fix the beginning of the great period in our poetry generally known as the Renaissance period. In the same way we can say that Milton and Spenser are of one age, while Spenser and Dryden are not: here again we can roughly fix a limit. Between then, the years 1500 and 1660 or so we may put together, as forming one great and magnificent body, the poetry of the Renaissance.

It was an age of creation so vigorous, so exuberant, so spontaneous, that external forces seem at first sight to have exercised on it little formal and less constitutive influence. Still, we must remember that the Renaissance was, in part, a classical Renaissance: in this country at least, one of its occasions, if not its causes, was the revival of Greek learning, and especially of Greek philosophy. Erasmus, still in the twilight, recommends Plato and Aristotle, Theophrastus and Plotinus for educational purposes: and it was the full text of Aristotle, not the emasculated version of the Scholastics; Ascham knew the Republic so well as to quote it without acknowledgment; Lady Jane Grey read the Phaedo "with as much delight as some gentlemen would read a merry tale in Boccaccio."[1]

We may roughly distinguish three ways in which Greek philosophy influenced poetry in this period. Firstly, as always, it was latent as a whole in the thought of the age, and therefore in its poetry. Secondly, certain particular and definite phases of Greek thought, notably the Platonism of the Symposium and the Phaedrus, exercise such an influence on certain poets as almost to form a school. Thirdly, there are what may be called by-products of Greek philosophy, cosmological and metaphysical excerpts culled mostly from Aristotle, and from the Hylozoists, which are used, especially towards the end of the age, for purposes of poetical ornament.

The main currents of thought, as before, we can only touch briefly. If we may sum up in one phrase the meaning of the Renaissance, we may say that it was in general a movement from abstract to concrete. Politically, the abstract conception of a world-state finally vanishes in the welter of conflict, and the more concrete idea of the nation gains strength. Socially, the abstract distinction of the lord and his feudal dependants breaks down, and the rise of the middle class begins to relate the two terms to one another.

[1] Ascham.

Thus both within and without the nations begin to move upwards from the mechanical to the organic stage. In the domain of thought and religion the same forces are at work: externally the abstract universality of Rome is challenged, national churches begin to arise, and religion becomes a function of nationality: internally, nature and spirit, the ideal and the actual, are felt to be no longer reconcileable, and the doom of mediaeval dualism is sounded.

It is this last manifestation of the Renaissance spirit which both bears most nearly upon poetry, and is almost most akin to Greek philosophy. The feature of the age which usually impresses us most is the extension of the known world, the "sinking back of the floors of heaven" so vividly described by Froude. But this was not all. It was not only that the bounds of the universe were widened: its whole character was changed. It was no longer a lower world of nature, opposed to a higher world of spirit: rather it was a world already spiritual, in which deity was immanent. And, as in nature without, so in the nature of man: his higher and lower impulses were no longer sharply divided as the servants of God and the Devil: rather, he stood forth as a whole man, whose whole nature might be brought into unity with God. Thus the age restated the old Greek principle "Live according to nature," although the negative movement which had intervened had given a fuller and richer meaning to the phrase. Once again, beside the mediaeval ideal of an ascetic life dedicated to God, arose the ideal of life as a full and joyous activity of all the human powers.

Possibly the above is, historically, somewhat of an anticipation; few of the Renaissance poets could have formulated their thought so precisely. As usual, the full meaning of the age cannot be grasped until it has passed away, and the creative impulse has given place to the reflective. But it is indubitable that the source from which the Renaissance poetry drew its inspiration was the spiritualisation of nature within and without. It may have rested primarily on an unconscious synthesis, a synthesis of feeling rather than thought, but this is no more than to say it was a poetic age. Like the Greeks, the Elizabethans idealised easily and almost without effort; like the Greeks, they created first, and then reflected.

If unconscious idealisation is the main characteristic of Elizabethan literature, it is surely seen nowhere more clearly than in the age's most typical product, the drama. It is no paradox to say that Shakespeare and his fellows were at once the greatest of realists and the greatest of idealists; this

merely means that they were conscious of no distinction between the ideal and the real. Just as the whole of language formed their poetic vocabulary, so the whole of life formed their poetic world. Hence it is of little use to seek in the Elizabethan drama for traces of the patent influence of alien philosophies, least of all Greek philosophy: the spontaneous flood of creation disdained all influence from without. We may, if we please, collect passages which show a knowledge of certain portions of Greek philosophy: but we feel at once that they are more dead shoots grafted on to a living stem, receiving rather than giving life. Thus Marlowe knew a little Aristotelian logic and cosmology, probably from Scholastic sources.[1] Portia's speech on the quality of mercy shows traces of Stoic philosophy, percolating through Seneca: the super-sensible spheres and their music figure in at least one most beautiful passage.[2] Pythagoras' metempsychosis is known, and is even forced by Marlowe into a line,[3] and the list might be extended through others, notably Ben Jonson and Chapman. But when all are collected, they are seen to be the merest chance reminiscences, as accidental to the main purpose of the plays as King Cophetua and Childe Rowland.

Except, therefore, in so far as the whole thought of the age was akin to Greek philosophy, we must pass over the drama lightly. It is otherwise with lyric poetry. In the drama, as we have seen, the idea of the spirituality of nature was immanent, but not consciously expressed. In lyric poetry, however, some steps were made towards the articulation of the idea. The problem of which the poets were vaguely conscious, and which was soon to be fully formulated by the philosophers, was twofold. In the first place, the material universe had to be exhibited as a spiritual whole, in which the divine force was manifested throughout; secondly, man's nature had to be exhibited as a whole, with its capacity of rising to the divine level. Rennaissance thought rested, as we have seen, on the immediate and intuitive assertion of their ultimate identity; its task was to justify this assertion discursively. In this task, as we know now, it failed; many years were to elapse, the unconscious synthesis was to be broken up in the long negative movement of science, before even the real meaning of the problem could be grasped. But in the sixteenth and earlier seventeenth centuries, in the temporary equilibrium of faith and reason, soon to renew their ancient conflict, some attempts were made to solve the problem of thought, which for our present purpose, both in

[1] "Bid ὂν καὶ μὴ ὂν farewell."—*Faustus*, Sc. I.

[2] *Merchant of Venice*, Act V. [3] *Faustus*: ad. fin.

their philosophic and literary bearings, are most important. Greek philosophy had faced the same problem, which indeed in one form or another is the ultimate philosophic question of all ages. Plato and Aristotle had both, in the end, given a negative answer; the final position of both in regard to sense and reason, the worlds of theory and practice, was dualistic. And on the heels of dualism trod, as always, scepticism and mysticism. But there were certain phases in Greek thought, and especially in Plato, which seemed for the moment to point to a positive solution close at hand. It was on these phases that Elizabethan thought fastened, and, by a curious blend of Platonic and Aristotelian excerpts with the relics of mediaeval chivalry, it created a metaphysic of man and the world which seemed for the moment satisfactory.

This doctrine is generally called Italian Platonism, and certainly its most clear relationship is to the Symposium and Phaedrus. But there are traces of Aristotleianism in it, and its later developments follow closely the movement of Greek thought from the earlier dualism to the mysticism of Plotinus. We may state the doctrine briefly as follows: the ultimate force of the universe, alike in God, man, and the world, is love, the Platonic ἔρως. Love binds together the warring atoms, love unites man to man, and to God; lastly God, as love, is the sustaining power of the whole. In Aristotle's words, He moves the universe *ὡς ἐρώμενον*. Thus one part of the problem—the relation of the material world to God—is solved. The other part is more carefully articulated. The highest function of man's nature is love of God, and since all love is in part divine, he can rise to this from common human love. The "*scala amoris*," by which this is achieved, is elaborately worked out in six stages, strongly recalling the stages of knowledge as treated by Aristotle.[1] In the first place, the distinction between sense and reason is strongly drawn, in the true Platonic style; and, again Platonically, beauty is made the middle term between the two worlds. There are three stages in the love of material beauty, from which we rise to three in the love of spiritual beauty. The first stage in each is the birth of love for the beautiful individual person or mind; in the second stage, this is generalised, usually by absence from the loved object, into a love for beauty in all beautiful persons or minds; in the third stage, the idea of beauty becomes a true universal, a one-in-many and many-in-one. Thus the end of the first three stages is a love for universal beauty as seen in the person of the loved one; the end of the second three is love for universal

[1] Post. An. II. 19.

spiritual beauty, which is identical with religion, or love of God.

Such was in outline the creed of Italian Platonism. To us, no doubt, it seems a strange, almost alien movement in human thought, and its spirit is very far from what we understand by Platonism. But, exotic hybrid though it was, Italian Platonism contained at least some doctrines which had a very real meaning for the Elizabethan age. In the first place, the idealization of beauty and the view of material as a lower and preliminary stage to intelligible beauty, was characteristic of the age; it was, in fact, one more point in which the Elizabethans resembled the Greeks. Beauty was the easiest and most tangible principle for a concrete synthesis of the natural world; and two terms, God and nature, could be more easily reconciled, so to speak, on a metaesthetical than a metaphysical basis, at least until the preliminary work of science was done. And, secondly, the idealisation of love harmonised exactly with the feelings of the age. It is true that the Platonic Love soon became at best a fashionable amusement, at worst a pretext for debauchery; this was inevitable, since the whole system rested on a sharp abstraction of the higher elements in human passion from the lower. But for the moment, in the happy equilibrium of forces which produced our great love poetry, there was still enough ideality in love to make it an elevating force, enough actuality to make it an inspiration.

It is the sonneteers who owe most to Platonism; and it is natural that this should be so: for not only did the form and the theme both come from Italy, but the two are exactly fitted to one another. The true lyric form demands spontaneity and freedom of thought and individuality of tone. Epic and drama, on the other hand, are moulds too great to be filled with one passion only, and that in an abstracted form. The sonnet exactly suits a cast of thought partly individual and spontaneous, partly formal and stereotyped. Hence in the countless series of sonnets addressed to numberless heroines which burst forth at this time, the influence of Platonism was strong. Even in Sidney, who was avowedly a critic of the Platonic as of other literary conventions, we can see at times clear traces of the love philosophy. Thus the sonnet which begins

> "Leave me, O Love, which reachest but to dust,
> And thou, my mind, aspire to higher things,"

ends with the true ring of Platonism,

> "Then farewell, world, thy uttermost I see:
> Eternal love, maintain thy life in me."

He rises from the rejection of vulgar love, to the last step in the "*scala amoris*."

Love-philosophy finds its most notable expression in the sonnets of Shakespeare; at least the most successful answer to the vexed question of their order is that which exhibits them as a systematic exposition of Platonism—the six ascending stages of ideal love, and the six descending stages of vulgar love.[1] His was too great a soul to rest for long in the ornamental garden of an alien formalism; but it seems as if for a moment he paused to catch the full spirit of the love philosophy before passing on to the grander and subtler metaphysic of his dramas. And perhaps we may be thankful that this was so; for the external support of the system enabled him to develop freely the sensuous side of poetry to a pitch hardly equalled in our literature.

It is different with Spenser. He was of all the Elizabethan poets by far the most profound student of Greek philosophy, studying it in the original, without the aid of Italian interpreters; and he was beyond all question the most deeply influenced by it. The debt of the Faery Queen to Plato and Aristotle is obvious, especially in its external framework, with the list of Aristotleian virtues. To show in what detail the scheme is carried out we might note the six trials of Guyon in the second book; the first three are directed against precisely what the Greeks meant by *θυμός*, the second three against *ἐπιθυμία*, and the whole forms an exposition of the Greek *σωφροσύνη*. But perhaps the essential spirit of Spenser is to be found less in the Faery Queen than in the pure and profound Platonism of the Four Hymns. In the Hymn in Honour of Love the Italian influence can be felt; in all the others Spenser is clearly going behind the formal tradition, and drawing his inspiration from Plato himself. The Hymn in Honour of Beautie is really a metaphysic of the Love-philosophy. Starting from the conception, borrowed from Timaeus, of God making the universe after a pattern, Spenser goes on to show that all the beauty of the world is an expression of God's beauty, and that a beautiful form or face only serves as a guide to the beautiful spirit which animates it. After contrasting sensible and intelligible beauty in the true Platonic style, he then gives the reason for the coincidence of the two in the same person—namely, that the beautiful soul makes the body it inhabits beautiful—

"For soul is form, and doth the body make."

Love, then, is a "celestial harmony": and, to use a later phrase, a pre-established harmony; the two souls were made in heaven out of one mould and descended to earth, where they recognise their kinship, though in different bodies.

[1] Simpson's *Philosophy of Shakespeare's Sonnets.*

In the other two Hymns—to Heavenly Love and Heavenly Bəauty—Spenser attempts an even greater task, namely, to reconcile the conception of God as absolute beauty, with the Christian conceptions of him as father of Christ, and as the judge of man. The influence of Platonism is still strong: for example, he says that our pity and love for Christ must be elevated from the sphere of sense to that of mind; we must rise from our pity at the sight of Him on the Cross, to what is really the Platonic idea of pity. Or again, in the Hymn to Heavenly Beauty Sapience (σοφία) is reached by a dialectic similar to that of the Symposium, but ethical rather than aesthetic in character. Lastly, in the Mutability cantos Spenser, alone of English poets, has touched the core of Greek philosophy—the problem of change and permanence, of the One and the Many, of form and matter; and he ends with the ultimate form of Aristotle's doctrine of the εἶδος gradually realising itself through change.

Spenser, and Shakespeare in his sonnets, thus stand as the chief representatives respectively of the true and Italian Platonism. After them comes a decline; there is no more real study of Plato, and most of what is known comes through the Spenserian medium. For the age, as for Shakespeare individually, erotic metaphysic could at best be a mere temporary halting place. Further, the system itself was destined to undergo the fate which awaits all doctrines based on abstraction. The higher human love, so sharply abstracted from the lower, inevitably begins, as thought proceeds, to lose its content, and the amoristic cult becomes on the one hand a fashionable pursuit, on the other hand a mere name for religous mysticism; and neither form can give much inspiration to poetry. The court gallant, who prated of Platonic love, "fiddling harmonics on the strings of sensualism," and the poet singing of a higher Love which can only be described negatively, typify the two-fold end of all abstract systems.

The first stage in the decline may be seen in three poets, all strongly under the Spenserian influence—William Drummond, and the brothers Giles and Phineas Fletcher. All are orthodox Platonists, but we feel instinctively that in them Platonism is less of a creed and more of a cult. The doctrine of progress from sensual to intellectual love is common to all. but throughout it is becoming more definitely Christian in tone. Thus in Drummond's "Hymn to True Happiness," where the "chiefest bliss" is the possession of God's beauty, we feel that the essential element is Christianity, the accidental Platonism. In the same way it might be said that the Fletchers, and especially Giles, attempted to Platonise Christi-

anity, while Spenser Christianised Platonism. They seize rather on the negative than the positive Spenserian doctrines —the worthlessness of sensual pleasures, as opposed to intellectual,[1] the necessity of regarding Christ mentally rather than in bodily form.[2] More significant still, the influence of mysticism is already felt. Drummond takes from Plotinus the doctrine of a super-sensible world; Giles Fletcher speaks of participation in the One. In all these poets, however, there is still enough true Platonism left to give them a certain warmth of colouring usually absent from religious poetry. Love has not yet been entirely emptied of content by abstraction. The God of the Platonic Christians is still a God of life and joy, contrasting both with the awful judge of Calvinists and Puritans, and the metaphysical prius of Cartesians.

John Donne was a little earlier than the Fletchers, but his place is logically posterior to theirs. In him we see the love philosophy breaking up; its latent abstraction is becoming conscious and is thrusting the higher love apart not merely from the lower, but also from the realm of poetry. While Donne's work as a whole is remarkable for its imaginative colouring, in his philosophic poems we often feel the chill of a cold intellectualism. His rough and almost jerky manner seems to express the struggle of thought with itself. Thus in his "Valediction forbidding Mourning" abstract love has triumphed so completely over the lower life, as hardly to be living at all.

> "Our two souls therefore, which are one,
> Though I must go, endure not yet
> A breach, but an expansion
> Like gold to airy thinness beat."

How different is this calm, meditative coldness, from the warmth and joy of Spenser's "Prothalamion."

Throughout Donne's work we feel that mysticism is near: when woman is treated as the Idea of virtue, or the universal soul, the end cannot be far off. The last stage of all dialectics which move by the "*via negativa*" of abstraction, is reached when the abstract term, emptied of content, can no longer be described by positive predicates, but becomes the Unknown or Unknowable. Donne reaches this stage in "Negative Love"—

> "If that be simply perfectest
> Which can by no way be expressed
> Bnt negatives, my love is so."

The poem is full of reminiscences of Plotinus, and justly so: far as Plotinus stands to Plato, so Donne stands to Spenser.

[1] Christ's Triumph after death. Stanza 34, 39 and 40.

[2] Purple Island. VI., 75.

The English poetry of this period forms so complete a whole that it is difficult to divide it at any one point. But there was a time about 1620 at which the tide of the Renaissance spirit began to turn, and a reaction set in towards the still waters of the eighteenth century. Men became conscious once more of a rift between the ideal and the actual; the drama soon began to oscillate between crudely realistic comedy, from which the spiritual glow had vanished, and deliberately heroic tragedy, buttressed by laboured bombast and the artificial support of the rhyming couplet. In lyric poetry the oscillation was more obvious still; as we turn from Herrick's "Hesperides" to his "Noble Numbers," we do not rise from a lower stage to a higher: rather we leap from one world to another. The opposing voices of Puritanism and Hedonism grow louder and more discordant, and poetry suffers in consequence both at its higher and at its lower level. The ideal is less living, the actual is less inspiring; religious poetry becomes sterner and colder, secular poetry more frivolous and worldy. The freshness of the earlier age is gone, and the world gets ready for the coming of Classicism.

The poetic production of this age, however, was never more wonderful than towards its close. The lyrical poets were enabled to attain a balance of form and matter impossible to the spontaneous exuberance of the Elizabethans. The old contrast which the Greek critic loved to draw between consistent perfection and fitful magnificence was exemplified once more in the later and earlier lyric of this age. Bnt we cannot dwell on Herrick, Suckling and their fellows. Greek philosophy was little known to them, and would in any case have been alien to their spirit. At most we find echoes of the philosophic phraseology, as in the end of Herrick's address to his winding-sheet—

> "And for a while lie here conceal'd
> To be reveal'd
> Next at the great Platonick year
> And then meet here."

In two places only can we look for the direct influence of Greek philosophy, in Milton, and in the school of poets dubbed by Johnson the "Metaphysicals." Johnson indicated by the term primarily Donne, Cowley, Cleveland and a few more; but it is better, and truer historically, to omit Donne, and to extend the term, with Mr. Saintsbury, to cover the religious poets, Crawshaw, Vaughan, Herbert and Trahearne. The metaphysicals then form a group distinguished by a common tone, brooding and contemplative, and a style suggestive rather than descriptive, full of hidden meanings dimly adum-

brated—in brief, the style of mysticism, of ecstasy and immediate intuition rather than discursive thought. As such they were influenced by Greek philosophy in its more mystical phases, and especially by the Platonic tradition of the Spenserians. Indeed it is more by their general attitude than by any particular doctrine that we can distinguish the later from the earlier Platonists. Many of the thoughts of Drummond and the Fletchers reappear. Thus Vaughan revives the theory of love as a pre-established harmony in his poem "To Amoret"

> "I am persuaded of that state
> 'Twixt thee and me
> Of some predestined sympathy."

Crashaw, again in the "Glorious Epiphanie" follows the Hymn to Heavenly Love in making Christ an intellectual object—

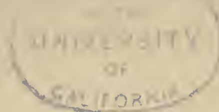
> "We vow to make brave way
> Upwards, and press on for the pure intelligential prey."

Finally, in Henry More, the mysticism anticipated by Donne finds its full expression. More is the most thorough-going philosopher of the metaphysicals and also the most complete Plotinian. The titles of his works—Enneades, Psychathanasia Antimonopsychia, Antipsychopannichia—show the bent of his mind. Plotinus' argument is transcribed at full length, and the three ultimate hypostases—the Good, Intellect, the Soul—are carefully identified with the Christian Trinity. More's work is laborious, and even exhaustive; but his choice of verse as a medium seems unnecessary. And the same is true in part of the other poets of this group; it is often where they Platonise that they prose. Their real inspiration was a genuine religious feeling: Platonism was only a secondary aid, to be tacked on to Christian doctrine where convenient. If we removed from their works all reminiscences of Greek philosophy we should lose little poetry, except possibly Vaughan's "Retreat," which anticipates the recollection-theory of Wordsworth's ode. We should lose the whole of More, but the loss would not be great.

We have left till last the great and solitary figure of Milton, which defies all theories of groups and tendencies. He knew Greek philosophy well, and when, as often, he is accused of lacking humour, it should be remembered that he is the only man who ever made Aristotle's logic amusing. The Vacation Exercise with its presentation of father Ens, and his ten sons the Predicaments, is no mean feat of academic satire. Milton uses largely the by-products of Greek philosophy and especially of the Platonic and Aristotelian cosmologies: the first-moving sphere, the daughters of necessity, the one first matter, the

quintessence, occur frequently in the early poems and Paradise Lost, but are merely part of that endless store of classical ornamentation he employed so lavishly. Whether the essential spirit of his poetry was much influenced by Greek philosophy is more open to question: in Paradise Lost, at least, the spring of poetic force is Christianity. But in his youth Milton came much under the influence of Plato: as he says in the Apology for Smectymnuus, "Thus . . . riper years led me to the shady spaces of philosophy, where, if I should tell ye what I learnt of chastity and love . . . and how the first and chiefest office of love begins and ends in the soul, producing those happy twins of divine generation, knowledge and virtue; with such abstracted sublimities as these, it might be worth your listening, readers." It is clear that from this conception of chastity as an "abstract sublimity" came the inspiration of Comus. The opposition between sense and reason is indeed the motif of the story, although Milton contrives to give it a preponderance of ethical character, whereas in Plato the distinction is primarily epistemological: but it was natural that a phrase like that of the Phaedo—"the soul is dragged by the body into the region of the changeable"—should be misinterpreted by an age that had not yet faced the problem of knowledge. But in general we may say that the Platonic antinomy of soul and body profoundly influenced Milton's early thought. Comus indeed may in a sense be called anti-Christian, since it involves the doctrine that the soul can win her own salvation, without an act of grace from on high. The sterner Puritanism of Milton's later years weakened his belief in this as in other doctrines derived from Greek philosophy. Platonism was for Milton a thing of youth and playtime: his mature life owned another master.

And in this Milton's life was an epitome of his age. The great period of poetic creation was passing away; the harmony of the spiritual life from which it sprang was broken. The faith and fervour of the Elizabethans was sufficient to hold together a universe of beauty and love, and to see the ideal in the real, but it could not stem the relentless tide of scientific differentiation, definition, and classification, which was daily extending the bounds of the world, thrusting God apart from man, and ruthlessly analysing the uuconscious synthesis of the earlier idealism. Faith and reason were to be sundered once more, and in the divorce were to become, the one mysticism, the other rationalism. In such a world there was little room for Greek philosophy: it was a creed at once too wide and too narrow—too wide in its idealism for an age of science, of materialism, of the study of man as the proper study of



mankind, too narrow to cover the wide sweep of the scientific consciousness in its new enfranchisement. The age of reason was beginning: and its attidude to Greek philosophy might be summed up in the words of Philodemus,

"καὶ παίζειν ὅτε καιρός, ἐπαίξαμεν· ἥνικα καὶ νῦν
οὐκέτι, λωιτερῆς φροντίδος ἁψόμεθα.

IV.

1660—1800.

It is difficult to draw a chronological line between Dryden and the metaphysicals: none the less it is true that he really belongs to a later age than they, if only in this, that they show a real interest in Greek philosophy which was not to revive in English poetry for nearly a century. Many phrases are used to describe this century—the Age of Reason, the age of prose, the "*saèculum rationalisticum*"; perhaps it is most suitably called the age of criticism supervening upon creation. In all regions of thought we feel the coming of a fuller self-consciousness, which expresses itself first negatively, in the condemnation of everything lying outstde its own domain. The Middle Ages had to be pronounced Gothic, the Elizabethan ignorantly exuberant, in order that the Age of Reason might shine forth in relative brilliance.

Self-conscious, critical, analytical, sundering every whole into its parts, and considering the parts before the whole—such was the general character of eighteenth century thought. Religion, philosophy, and poetry each took its own domain, and endeavoured to explain it by itself; and in each in turn the conflicting forces of the lower and higher tore the whole asunder. Religion oscillated between pietism and the vaguest deism; philosophy between scepticism and the crudest idealism; poetry between forced heroic and blank prose. The favourite metrical form is characteristic: the rhyming heroic makes each point, couplet by couplet, independently of the rest. With all its wonderful art and unequalled elaboration, Augustan poetry is still the poetry of decline; all Pope's skill cannot stay its lapse from the organic to the mechanical.

Hence for our present purposes we cannot linger on the *saeculum rationalisticum*. Greek philosophy was not only alien to the spirit of the age, but was also branded with the stigma

of antiquity. In any case it was excluded from the domain of poetry. When poetry had to choose fitting subjects, and clothe them in elegant and correct diction, with pleasing fancy and temperate conceits, what need was there of Plato?

References to the Greek philosophers in this age are of the merest chance character, and usually show more acquaintance with literary tradition than with the authors themselves. Even to the philosophers of the age Plato and Aristotle are merely the first and least reasonable *a priori* and *a posteriori* dogmatists; even to Kant, who stands between this age and the next, Plato "left the world of sense, and ventured beyond on the wings of his ideas into the empty space of pure understanding."[1]

Greek philosophy has become more than ever an external ornament, accidental to the main purpose of poetry. One instance might be noted as showing some attempt at sympathy with the benighted thinkers of old. Addison's Cato, sitting alone with a drawn sword and the Phaedo, begins—

> "It must be so! Plato, thou reason'st well,"

and goes on to a defence of immortality not unsuitable to a Stoic, though coloured by eighteenth century influence:

> "Eternity! thou pleasing, dreadful thought! . . . .
> . . . . If there's a power above us,
> And that there is, all nature cries aloud
> In all her works, he must delight in virtue," etc.

There was, however, one rather devious bypath by which some influence from Greek philosophy could operate on English poetry. In a self-conscious age, poetry and poetic criticism can hardly be considered apart, and criticism was very much influenced by French classicism. This again contained many elements derived from the Greek philosophers. The fascinating and stimulating work on the Sublime, half way between the physics and the metaphysics of criticism, gained popularity through Boileau's translation. Aristotle's Poetics, though long known in England, assumed new power under the French influence. The doctrine of the "unities" figures largely in Dryden's Essay on Dramatic Poesy: he himself (Neander) is the only one of the four interlocutors to question its authority. But had English drama still been living, it is doubtful whether such disputations would have influenced it much; as it was, it mattered little what particular misinterpretation of the Poetics was followed by Colley Cibber and Mrs. Centlivre.

It is needless, then, to linger on the eighteenth century, the long and necessary slumber of the English muse previous

[1] Introduction to the *Critique*.

to her second great awakening. Science had to extend her boundaries, new matter of thought had to be hammered out by the iron sledge of classification and subdivision before the reconstruction and reshaping could begin. It is commonly said that the poets of the time saw nature through their library windows; we might add that only rarely on the shelves of those libraries, uncut and covered with dust, lay the works of Plato and Aristotle.

V.

1800—1900.

The close relation between poetry and contemporary thought, and the position of poetry as a function of that thought, were never more clearly illustrated than in the great rebirth which is usually dated from the publication of the Lyrical Ballads. The five great English poets in whom poetry was born again were all emphatically men of one age, drawing their inspiration from a common source. Hence it is impossible to understand or appreciate their work without glancing at the movements in thought of which it was the expression.

The chief force which moved them all alike, and which made it "bliss in that dawn to be alive," was undoubtedly the negation of all external constraint, the challenge thrown down to convention and constituted authority. The French Revolution, the Introduction to the Lyrical Ballads, and the Necessity of Atheism, are all different manifestations of this same spirit. Natural man unimpeded by political authority, natural language free from conventional poetic diction, the world of nature unaffected by an external God—these were but three phases of a common ideal. In all departments of life the principle was laid down that whatever is constituted is bad. Such an attitude of mind may well be called revolutionary; yet it is interesting to note that just where thought seemed to break away most decisively from its previous course there was really the most complete continuity. Criticism, analysis, individualism, and even atomism, in politics, ethics, and religion—all these had been the watchwords of the Age of Reason. It was only carrying the process one step further to deny the authority of State and Church, and to qnestion the validity of the religious abstraction in which eighteenth century deism had vaguely acquiesced. When

the moment came, the Age of Reason was helpless before the offspring of its own logic; once more Zeus dethroned Kronos, and in the chaos of conflict which ensued it seemed for a time as if the nineteenth century would have to repeat the further cry:—

Δῖνος βασιλεύει, τὸν Δί' ἐξεληλακώς.

But the danger was only momentary. Once again, though the cutting edge of truth was negative, there were positive elements already latent in its assertion. Beside the negative idea of Liberty and the arithmetical idea of Equality was set the far more fruitful conception of Fraternity. In the same way the "return to nature" had always a goal as well as a starting-point; State, Church and Society were denounced only to enhance the glorification of "nature" in its more restricted sense; and this soon led to the admission of man in his simpler social relations to the realm of poetic orthodoxy. The extreme form of the negative doctrine—the abstract return upon the self—quickly worked itself out to its own contradiction in what was known as "Wertherism," and a concrete doctrine of liberty soon began to take shape.

Many movements in the thought of this age bear a resemblance to those of Greek philosophy. The similarity of the Greek hedonism and the English utilitarianism is more easily exaggerated than underestimated; it is always well to remember that Shelley explicitly declared himself a utilitarian.[1] Far more striking are the reminiscences of the other and nobler individualistic creed of Stoicism. The peculiar stoic traces in Kant's Theory of Knowledge do not concern us here so much as two of the more general doctrines. One of them is the conception of a rational principle in man which lifts him above the play of accident and circumstance: this influence took shape in the doctrine of Duty, which the "Intuitionist" school opposed to the Utilitarians. The other, even more important poetically, is the conception of a soul or principle animating external nature. Of both these doctrines we find many traces, and it is noteworthy that both assisted the positive movement in the "return to nature." Philosophic or poetic thought of this age always tended to lapse into an attitude, which might be summed up in Bishop Heber's words, that "every prospect pleases, and only man is vile." The first part of this statement receives a new and richer meaning when nature is conceived as a great organic system, inspired by a "soul"; the second part is corrected, when man is conceived, not as a creature of mere animal desires, and with more than an animal's power of satisfying

[1] Cf. *Defence of Poetry*.

them, but as the organ of a rational principle, a being who at once issues and obeys the categorical imperative of duty.

We can only touch briefly on the five great men who renewed the youth of English poetry. Of these Coleridge is both actually and logically the first. He definitely stands between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with one foot in either poetic world. Much of his work is redolent of the Age of Reason; much again is directly revolutionary: most of the small portion which is really great is purely romantic; incidentally, he is a Kantian, a disciple of Goethe, and a Christian pietist. Yet in the poetic medley which sprang from this philosophic chaos we can see the germ of nearly the whole of nineteenth century poetry; and his personal influence on literature is almost immeasurable. For this reason it is to be traced in the works of others rather than his own. In nearly all his philosophic moods Coleridge owed something to Greek philosophy; but direct reminiscences are few. Of these one deserves notice—the passage in the Sonnet on a Journey Homeward,

> "And some have said
> We lived, ere yet this robe of flesh we wore."

which no doubt inspired Wordsworth's more famous utterance of the same doctrine. In general, the Kantian influence had led Coleridge at once too far and not far enough to be consciously in sympathy with Greek philosophy; on the one hand, the simpler antitheses of sense and reason, ideal and actual, could not satisfy one who had faced with Kant the mightier antinomies of the noumenal and phenomenal worlds, the empirical and universal self; on the other hand, Idealism had not yet advanced far enough to catch the full meaning of those half-hints that "all nature is akin," and that "all men aim at one end, divining it to be somewhat."

Wordsworth's work seems by contrast strangely uniform and equable in tone, if not in poetic quality. He was never as deeply touched as Coleridge by the negative side of the "return to nature"; the change in his views supposed by some to be represented in Browning's "Lost Leader," only made him, instead of a mild revolutionary, a mild reactionary. His real source of inspiration was always nature, and the simpler social relations of man. But his quietism was no inert or unreflecting acquiescence; rather it was a creed as thoroughly meditated and as fervently upheld as that of the wildest revolutionary. Nature as a mechanical or even organic system bound by law, man as a spirit who wins his freedom by obedience to the same law in a higher form—these ideas, if not consciously expressed, are everywhere

latent in Wordsworth's poetry. Hence come his many and striking affinities with Greek philosophy. The old fundamental doctrine, "Live according to nature," is restated with a yet deeper meaning. Even more striking are the reminiscences of Stoicism. It was doubtless some Kantian influence permeating through Coleridge which helped to mould the Ode to Duty; even here the idea contained in the lines

"Thou dost preserve the stars from wrong,
And the most ancient Heavens, through Thee, are fresh and strong."

goes far beyond Kant, who would at most admit the phenomenal world as a "type of the intelligible." But in his interpretation of the "*anima mundi*" Wordsworth stands quite alone; no other poet meditated so profoundly, or expressed so fully the

"sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man."

The same doctrine is maintained, in a tone alternately more fervid and more despairing, by Shelley. More than any poet of the age he assails man as he is, governed by kings, directed by priests, bowing the knee to convention; more than any other poet, he pictures with hopeful imagination what man may become. But throughout all there is the fundamental idea of a spirit or principle in the natural world, which finds its highest manifestation in mankind. There are times—notably in "Prometheus Unbound"[1]—when Shelley seems almost a lineal descendant of the Italian Platonists, in proclaiming Love the ultimate principle of the Universe. Really, however, he has given a new meaning to the term. Love is no longer the abstraction of sensual passion, but rather the desire for the Good, or the goal towards which all things strive. Shelley at least would have subscribed to the opening sentence of Aristotle's Ethics; and this fundamental Greek doctrine has never been more splendidly expressed than in the close of Adonais:

"—that sustaining Love
Which through the web of being blindly wove
By man and beast and earth and air and sea,
Burns bright or dim, as each are mirrors of
The fire for which all thirst, now beams on me
Consuming the last clouds of cold mortality."

There are many reminiscences in Shelley of another Greek doctrine—that of the One and the Many. The famous simile in "Adonais" is introduced by the lines

[1] *Esp.*, Act II., Sc. 4; and the Song of the Earth in Act IV.

"The One remains, the Many change and pass;
Heaven's light for ever shines, earth's shadows fly."

while in "Hellas" a new form is given to it in the speech of Ahasuerus who speaks of the One, beside which

"this Whole
Of suns, and worlds, and men, and beasts, and flowers,
With all the silent and tempestuous workings
By which they have been, are, or cease to be,
Is but a vision."

On the two last poets of the group we need not linger. Neither Keats nor Byron was deeply touched by the spirit of Greek philosophy. Keats, of course, was cut off from direct knowledge of the original; fnrther he was less in sympathy than the other poets of his time with those movements in thought which were most akin to the Greek. In so far as he may be said to have joined in the "return to nature,' it was more by a direct and unreflecting intuition of the spirituality of the natural world than by a conscious effort from convention towards freedom; in this respect, at least, Keats was really an Elizabethan. Byron, on the other hand, represented the negative moment in its extreme form; and in seeking a negative liberty he stumbled vainly after the will-o'-the-wisp phantom of caprice. Endowed with an active and vigorous imagination, he had little speculative insight; romanticism appealed to him more on its historical and legendary side. Wherever, as in Cain, he touches the greater realities, we feel that he is really playing with words; his immensities and sublimities seldom ring true. Hence, in his references to Greek philosophy he never rises above the commonplace view, as in his address to Plato and his "confounded sophistries,"[1] and the description of

"Aristotle's rules,
The Vade Mecum of the true sublime,
Which makes so many poets, and some fools."[2]

It is small consolation to find the same easy patronage extended to Bishop Berkeley.[3] In his treatment of philosophy Byron, the Republican cosmopolite, proved himself at last an English nobleman.

Keats and Byron are, in different ways, examples of a movement in thought then only nascent, but in its later growth of great importance. This was the conception of organic development, since canonized under the title of Evolution, which had already in Hegel's hands transformed the idealist philosophy and shaped the lines of future speculation. It gave a meaning and a purpose to the mediaevalism and passion for the antique already prominent in the thought of the Revo-

[1] *Don Juan*, I, 116. [2] ib. 201. [3] ib. XI., 1.

lution period; for to it the past was no longer a dead thing. Hence came the interest in history which was perhaps the most abiding of Byron's fitful desires; hence came too that power of living again in the past, that "historical imagination" of which "St. Agnes' Eve" and "La Belle Dame sans Merci" are the first fruits. Most of all was this idea important as it affected philosophy. More and more men came to regard past systems not as definite solutions of particular questions, to be accepted if right and rejected if wrong, but rather as stages in the growth of a thought, which continually faces the same problems with an ever deepening comprehension of their meaning.

When, therefore, we come to estimate the debt of nineteenth century poets to Greek philosophy, we feel that it is of quite a different kind to that of previous centuries. On the one hand, Greek philosophy is more thoroughly studied and understood than before. On the other hand, for this very reason, it really has less influence; it can be comprehended just because it has passed away; it is no longer regarded as a system, so to say, armed and militant in the arena of dialectics. Thus to nineteenth century thought it is as a garment with which the poet can clothe himself by an imaginative effort; he does not alternately hug it to him or cast it from him in the oscillations of faith. There is nothing in the nineteenth century resembling the Elizabethan Platonism; rather, we find presentations of Greek thought, sympathetic, imaginative, full of the colour which comes of detached study, and the life with which self-conscious thought can endow its past.

Examples of this modern treatment of Greek philosophy may be found in any of the Victorian poets, but it will suffice to note a few only, since they really fall outside the limits of our subject. Perhaps the most elaborate attempt to reproduce a phase of Greek thought is found in Matthew Arnold's "Empedocles on Etna," a somewhat unequal dramatic medley, redeemed by the splendour of certain passages, and by most beautiful lyrics. It is characteristic of the Victorian spirit to go behind the great age of Greek philosophy to that of the Hylozoists, and to indicate the promise of what was to come. Especially striking is the apostrophe to the stars, beginning

> "No, no, ye stars, there is no death with you,
> No languor, no decay"—

which touches on the typical Greek conception of the heavens as the realm of invariable law.

Tennyson, on the whole, found the mythology and poetry of the ancients more congenial than their philosophy. Possibly he was influenced to some extent by the spirit of Positivism,

which regarded the metaphysical era as an unenlightened predecessor of the scientific, and sought to reconcile the old antinomy of nature and spirit by rechristening the terms phenomenon and epiphenomenon. He seems to oscillate between a mild materialist despair and a mild religious hopefulness. Greek philosophy appealed to him chiefly on its imaginative side, or as refracted through the medium of ancient poets. In the "Princess" he touches on the more poetical parts of Plato, drawing the picture of

> "Diotima, teaching him that died
> Of hemlock."

Again in Lucretius we have a most beautiful presentation of the old Greek atomism

> "the flaring atom-streams
> And torrents of her myriad universe
> Ruining along the illimitable inane."

But we feel all through that the poet Lucretius stands between Tennyson and Epicureanism, as in the passage about the gods

> "who haunt
> The lucid interspace of world and world
> Where never creeps a cloud nor moves a wind . . . .
> . . . . Nor sound of human sorrow mounts to mar
> Their sacred everlasting calm."

To collect all the reminiscences of Greek philosophy in Browning's works would be an endless task; overt references are common, and still commoner are turns of phrase and suggestions subtly recalling the Greek original. In the first act of Paracelsus alone we find a reference to the recollection theory—

> "That life was blotted out—not so completely
> But scattered wrecks enough of it remain—"

to "the soul being darkened by sense"—

> "Wall upon wall, the gross flesh hems it in
> This perfect, clear perception—which is truth—

and to the two world theory

> "those who set themselves
> To find the nature of the spirit they bore
> Refused to fit them to its narrow sphere
> But chose to figure forth another world."

On the other hand, Browning rarely makes philosophy or the philosophic life his main theme. It might even be held that he was naturally inclined to slight philosophy, not because it might end in doubt and unrest, but because it might end in static calm. Thus when he treats Epicureanism in Cleon the end is no tranquil Ataraxia; on the contrary there is all through the poem a growing note of sadness, rising to the poignant cry of despair—

> "The horror quickening still from year to year,
> The consummation coming past escape
> When I shall know most, and yet least enjoy,

> When all my works wherein I prove my worth
> Being present still to mock me in men's mouths . . . .
> . . . . I, I, the feeling, thinking, acting man,
> The man who loved his life so overmuch,
> Sleep in my urn."

It would be an attractive task to pursue further our search for the many beautiful passages in which modern poets have reshaped Greek thought; but such a task, as we have said above, really lies outside our present purpose. The nineteenth century spirit involves a loss as well as a gain; the more fully we grasp a phase of past thought the more definitely it becomes a thing of the past, a thing outside us; it can never again be a present and living influence to us, as it was to the Elizabethans. We can see now that the Greek thinkers were only the first who dealt with the eternal problems; the oppositions which they faced have deepened, the content of philosophic speculation has been enriched by the intervening ages, and it is only by an imaginative effort that we can put ourselves in their places, and feel again with them the wonder out of which philosophy sprang. Least of all can poetry and the thought on which it rests remain content with the partial and limited solution, which was all that Greek philosophy could give us; rather, while regarding it as the seed from which modern thought grew and watching the process of its gathering strength and volume through history, poetry must still rest ultimately on the primal impulse, which "reaches after the Good, divining it to be something" which can see the ideal in the actual, and invest the world of nature with a character more than natural.

All criticism and analysis of poetry must always end in a certain sense of failure. When we have noted influences, and causes, and movements, when we have tabulated our groups and dated our periods, we must always remember that behind all there lies, inscrutable and indefinable, the spirit of poetry itself. The ultimate fact is not that thought and diction and metre were in a certain state of development, but that these things being so, poetry sprang to life. More especially must English poetry, whose dominant note has always been vigour and spontaneity, remain in essence a mystery, like the life of a man or the even more intangible life of a nation. At most we can say that at certain times some definitely formative influence was exercised on it by the thinkers of old, while in the thought which lies behind it was always contained the living seed of Greek philosophy. For the rest, we must listen rather than speak, and receive in humble reverence the greatest and most splendid heritage of Englishmen.

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